

THE GRIEF OF MEN

When men lose someone they have loved deeply they hurt with the same intensity that women do. They miss their spouse, children, parent, brother or sister just as much as a woman would. The difference is that women are permitted to cry and lament their loss and turn to others for support. Men are not. Men are capable of every emotion that a woman is, but his conditioning—how he was brought up and what society has told him about how he must behave—prevent him from expressing those emotions. Although each person is unique, there are generic tendencies in the way men handle their grief. This conditioning of the American male has been a powerful and negative influence on the ability of men to express their grief openly.

While he is growing up a man assumes certain roles that he learns from observing his father and other men. He is also taught acceptable ways of behaving by teachers, relatives, and friends that condition him to function in our society. Ordinarily this works, but when he experiences a deep loss or other emotional stress, this conditioning prohibits him from grieving in a healthy way. Bill Schatz, bereaved father and author of *Healing A Father's Grief*, says that these roles create special difficulties that prevent healthy grieving: they are Macho-man, Protector, Provider, and Self-sufficient Man.

The role of MACHO-MAN is begun in very early childhood with such admonishments as “Big boys don’t cry,” and it is reinforced throughout life. Big contributors to this reinforcement are movies, television, and advertising. By adulthood the Macho role is usually accepted on an unconscious level. Thus, when a man feels sadness at the loss of a significant person in

his life, and his throat tightens up and tears come to his eyes, his conditioning to the role of Macho Man will not allow him to cry. He pushes these tears down inside himself as he gets busy caring for others, working overmuch, and sometimes turning to alcohol for relief.

At the very time a man needs to express the emotions of sadness, anger and guilt, others are encouraging him to suppress them by such statements as “You’re sure handling this well”, or “It’s good that you are holding up with every one else falling apart.” From all around he is being told NOT TO GRIEVE. As a result a man is can be irritable or withdrawn and seemingly not affected by the death of someone very dear to him.

In the role of PROTECTOR a man is supposed to protect his wife, or child, or those close to him, from harm. Then when a wife, or child, or someone he feels a responsibility for dies, feelings of failure haunt him. Not only could he not protect the loved one from death, he sees others in the family grieving and he cannot protect them from the pain they are experiencing. He feels that he has failed.

As PROVIDER the male is expected to work. Thus he goes back to work almost immediately after the death. There he meets with others who don’t know what to say to him, or, other men, conditioned as he has been, expect him to go on with his work with a “stiff upper lip.” The result is a feeling of isolation. Add to this the normal difficulty concentrating, lack of physical energy, and depression that accomplishes grief, and you have a man struggling to get through the day who is tired, confused, and feeling very alone. (The retired widower may no longer go “out” of the home to work, but the role of Provider is still strong in him and his reactions to his role conditioning will be the same.)

The last role to be considered is that of SELF-SUFFICIENT MAN. All his life the

American male is taught to “stand on his own two feet.” He is taught to “do it himself” and not turn to others for help. Therefore when he needs to cry or talk to others about his loved one or how he feels, his conditioning will not allow him to do that. This self-sufficiency will not only keep him from reaching out to others for support, but will keep him from utilizing the therapeutic aid of a self-help group for the bereaved, or from getting the professional help which he may so badly need.

Bill Schatz says “Understanding the male conditioning is very important.... But, just as important is the need to convince men to accept their true feelings as normal, by-pass role expectations, and give themselves permission to grieve.”

If you are a bereaved male consider how role conditioning is affecting your ability to grieve in a healthy way. Schatz gives the following suggestions that may be helpful in allowing yourself to grieve in a positive and healthful way.

1. Try to allow yourself to express your emotions. Hopefully you can sidestep your conditioning and express your feelings to a trusted friend.
2. Learn to cry again. If you can't cry in front of others, do it alone. Go to the cemetery alone and cry. Cry in the privacy of your bedroom. Cry in the shower. No matter where you cry, the point is to get the tears out.
3. Recognize that you have the same feelings as women do but it is your conditioning that prevents you from expressing them.
4. Look at your conditioning and see how unrealistic it really is.
5. Know that it is the sign of real strength and personal confidence to allow yourself to express tears or other emotions in front of others.

6. If you cannot allow yourself to openly express your emotions, at least exercise regularly. Any emotion creates internal energy which must be gotten rid of. Hard exercise will do this. (A word of caution: check with your doctor if strenuous exercise is new for you.)
7. Find a self-help group for bereaved parents. You will find out that you are not alone and that others are, or have, experience what you are experiencing.
8. Direct your anger or frustration at THINGS not people.
9. Let other members of your family know that while you may express your grief differently, it doesn't mean you are not grieving just as deeply as they are.
10. Be patient with yourself. Grief takes time.
11. Do not rely on drugs or alcohol.

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